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ABSTRACT

There are several practical reasons for preferring syllabic writing in teaching the Eskimo language to non-Eskimos: (1) the use of syllabic writing avoids the Roman letters t, l, n, s, g, and r, which stimulate the pronunciation habits of French or English; (2) syllabic writing is well-suited to Eskimo because of its small number of vowels; (3) Eskimo is easier to read when written in syllabic, and much of the Eskimo literature available is written in syllabic; (4) syllabic writing guards against one of the misuses of writing in the language class, discussion of word structure. The most popular variety of syllabic writing for Eskimo does not have a distinct symbol for each sound and does not seem to work well in teaching the language. Another system--an extended variety--uses combinations of symbols to represent simple sounds. The combinations, however, are sometimes ambiguous. An artificial teaching alphabet for Eskimo is now in use at the University of Ottawa. It is syllabic, similar to the extended type of writing, and eliminates the problems of the other syllabic systems. The symbols of the teaching alphabet are given here. (PMP)

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WRITING IN THE ESKIMO CLASSROOM

T. R. Hofmann

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An alphabet used in teaching a language must have a different symbol for each contrasting sound, and each symbol must stand for a single sound. Few alphabets of literary languages maintain this ideal, and Eskimo is no different. There are several different writing systems presently in use for Eskimo, but none of them can serve as a good alphabet for teaching the language.

There are 2 main types of writing for Eskimo: alphabetic and syllabic. Alphabetic writing, like that of English or French, divides sound up into pieces so small that they cannot be pronounced alone -- the *t* in *water* or the *d* in *wade* can't be pronounced without some vowel to lean on. Syllabic writing, on the other hand, divides sound up into syllables. Because syllables can be pronounced, every syllabic letter has a sound, and has that sound in a word. Syllabic writing is easier to learn -- for children and for people who have never learned to read -- and is best for languages which have few vowel sounds. It allows faster and easier reading. Japanese uses syllabic writing, as does Korean. Many of the languages of India have a syllabic-like writing.

There are several practical reasons to prefer syllabic writing in teaching the Eskimo language to non-Eskimos. First, it is desirable to avoid the Roman letters *t*, *l*, *n*, *s*, *g*, and *r* because these stimulate the pronunciation habits proper to French or English but foreign to Eskimo. Also, the Roman alphabet has no symbols for 2 important sounds of Eskimo -- the ŋ-sound and the "throaty" (uvular) *k* (spelled often as *q*). Second, syllabic writing is well-suited to Eskimo because of its small number of vowels. Eskimo is easier to read if it is written in syllabic, and this brings us to several reasons based on the popularity of syllabic writing. The Eskimo teacher becomes accustomed more readily to syllabic writing; much if not most of the literature available to the person studying Eskimo is written in syllabic, and the language classroom must teach syllabic writing, whether or not it is used in the class. The sooner it is introduced in class, the sooner the students can benefit

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from existing literature. To use an alphabetic writing not only leads to additional interference from the student's native language (and is difficult for the teacher), but it is unnecessary learning insofar as it can be easily picked up (without interference) once the language is partly learned. Lastly, the use of syllabic writing also guards against one of the misuses of writing in the language class; it makes it more difficult to discuss the structure of words.

The most popular variety of syllabic writing for Eskimo does not have a distinct symbol for each sound. Each of the symbols ᓯ ᓴ ᔪ ᕈ ᕆ and ᔨ stand for 2 different and contrasting sounds. This is tolerable for people reading their own language because they know so much about their language that they guess right almost every time. The words *lead* (*lēd* or *lĕd*), *bow* (*bō* or *bah-oo*) and *singing* (*winging* or *singe-ing*), and *convict* (*cónvict* or *convíct*) seldom cause difficulty for the English speaker. However, such a writing system is not good for teaching the language. For this, we need a writing system which indicates unmistakably exactly what sound a word has.

There is an extended variety of syllabic writing[2] in use for Eskimo: it overcomes most of the shortcomings by adding many small marks above the line so that the problems with the syllabic system above (as in ᓴ, ᕆ)[3] are solved by writing ᓵ for ᓴ when it is pronounced ŋ (the velar nasal sound) and ᖁ for ᕆ when it is pronounced q (the voiceless uvular sound). This variety is almost adequate for language teaching because for every combination of symbols there is almost always only one pronunciation. But because it uses combinations of symbols to represent simple sounds, it has 2 main drawbacks. Occasionally the combinations are ambiguous and students will guess incorrectly at the sound. Also, students will sometimes pronounce all the symbols as if they were separate, instead of 1st combining them, and then pronouncing the combination. (A teaching alphabet should have at most one symbol for a unitary sound.) It wastes the time of the students and the teachers to use writing which misguides the students. The 2nd drawback is based on the fact that the writing used in teaching a language guides the student in forming habits of pronunciation

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and, most importantly, hearing. Language students learn to hear what the writing system points out to them to listen for. These drawbacks lead to the rejection of the popular extended syllabic writing.

Thus arrives the necessity of using an artificial alphabet for teaching. Teaching alphabets have been used for Eskimo by every linguist except Gagné[4] (e.g. Mallon,[5] Correll, McGregor, Peacock). They are widely used in teaching other languages.[6] A teaching alphabet[7] for Eskimo should be syllabic, for the reasons already stated. Ideally, it will be similar to the 2nd variety of syllabic which we discussed above, perhaps with the special mark merged with the basic symbol. For the sake of learning them, the merged symbols should allow rotations and reflections for the different vowels because all the other syllabics are either reflections (< and >) or rotations (< and ∧). This results in symbols like:

ᓐ for the ŋ sound[8] (velar nasal)
ᖅ for the q sound[9] (uvular voiceless)

The syllabic symbols of the teaching alphabet which we have tentatively adopted at the University of Ottawa are:

	voiceless	voiced	nasal
labial	ᐸ	ᐹ	ᒪ
apical	ᒡ	ᓭ	ᓇ
velar	ᑲ	ᒐ	ᓐ
uvular	ᖃ	ᖁ	
special	ᓴ	ᒡ	
vowel		ᐃ	

This is an adequate teaching alphabet, in that it overcomes all the problems mentioned above. It is the best alphabet we know of for teaching Eskimo. It is consistent with the principle of Eskimo syllabics, and allows easy transition to both varieties of syllabics. It also has the added benefit that Eskimos who are used to reading the unextended variety of syllabic writing, will hardly notice the difference (ᓂᐹ [meat or food] will be ᓂᐹ) and material written in this variety can be modified for classroom use by adding a few pen marks.

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NOTES

[1]It is difficult to read Eskimo written in the Roman alphabet because of the long words. The eye cannot take in a long stretch of letters in a single glance; thus reading does not follow the normal time pattern of the language. Syllabic writing reduces this problem by shortening the written forms of words. Further, romanized words in Eskimo tend to look alike because only 17 letters are used. The only obvious distinctive feature of a word is its length. Syllabic writing makes for more distinctive shapes with 46 basic syllables plus diacritics. This makes the syllabic writing much easier than the alphabetic for reading. I am indebted to J.-P. Paillet of Carleton University for pointing out these facts.

[2]"Basic guide for use of syllabic finals," vi 1971, *Keewatin Echo*, p. 5-6.

[3]I will use the *a (ah* or *uh)* form for quoting; the *u (oo)* form is its mirror image and the *i (ee)* form is its upside down or twisted image.

[4]Gagné, R. C., *Eskimo Language Course*, Dept. of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

[5]Mallon, *Eskimo Language Course*, D.I.A.N.D., Rankin Inlet, NWT.

[6]Lado, R. and Fries, C., *English Pronunciation*, ELI, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

[7]'Alphabet' as used here is to be understood in the mathematical sense: a set of symbols out of which words are formed.

[8]Suggested by M. Uviluq, ᐅᕙᓪᓕᖅ, who has been instrumental in identifying difficulties and showing the best compromise between teaching needs and writing realities.

[9]Hofmann, T. R., "Teaching the Eskimo Syllabics," *The Northian*, in press.

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